

John Adams

1735–1826 Second President of the United States.

After John Adams graduated from Harvard College in 1755, the only work he could find was that of a schoolteacher in Worcester, Massachusetts, about fifty miles from his home near Boston. He hated the job.

Fifty boys ranging in age from five to fifteen came to his one-room schoolhouse every day. They sensed that he knew nothing about teaching and made his life miserable. He wanted desperately to escape from them, but what else could he do?

On a warm day in May, he noticed unusual activity around the local courthouse. Refreshment booths sprang up on the village green. Saddled horses stood tied up in rows before the tavern. Lawyers from all over the state had crowded into Worcester for

the opening of the law courts. A school holiday was declared, leaving Adams free to go to court and listen to the lawyers arguing before the judge. Sitting there, he felt himself taking part in the arguments. He made up his mind: He would become a lawyer.

It was a big step up for the son of a farmer. He had been born in Braintree, Massachusetts, on October 30, 1735. As a boy, he liked the hard work on the farm, but his family was determined that he would have a college education, so he mastered Latin to pass the entrance exam for Harvard.

In those days there were no schools for studying law. After deciding on this profession, Adams became an apprentice to a man who already was a lawyer. He copied legal papers, read law books,

attended court sessions and talked about cases. He learned enough so that he was admitted to the bar as a lawyer in Boston in 1758.

At the age of twenty-three, Adams was impatient and ambitious. He was blunt in speech and serious in his belief that laws were made to protect people. He argued cases about boundary lines and wandering horses that ate grass in a neighbor's field. More and more people came to seek his help.

As his career progressed, he began to think of marriage. He fell in and out of love frequently as he courted the young women of the area, but his wandering stopped when he met Abigail Smith, the daughter of a local minister. She was seventeen years old, he was twenty-six.

One day when he came to call, he noticed her reading a book. "A big book for such a little head," he said. "You think so," she replied. And then she went on. "Girls are not to know anything, I am told, beyond kitchen and parlor. Yet girls, too, may have their curiosity. And even a little head, Mr. Adams, may possess a longing for knowledge, or at least for understanding."

They were married on October 25, 1764. Their marriage became one of the most remarkable in American history. Not only did Abigail Adams' hus-



Abigail Adams was the wife of one President and the mother of another. Portrait by Gilbert Stuart. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington; gift of Mrs. Robert Homans.

band become President of the United States, but so did one of their sons. Moreover, Mrs. Adams was a keen observer of events and her letters give a vivid picture of the political life of her times.

They were exciting times: the days of the American Revolution, then the founding of the United States. And the Adams family was right in the middle of the excitement as the new nation grew out of the thirteen English colonies on the Atlantic coast.

Adams became involved in the struggle when the British passed the Stamp Act of 1765. This law required Americans to buy stamps to affix to all sorts of items—newspapers, wills, legal documents, and even playing cards. The American colonists protested that this was taxation without representation. They blocked the customs house in Boston to prevent distribution of the stamps.

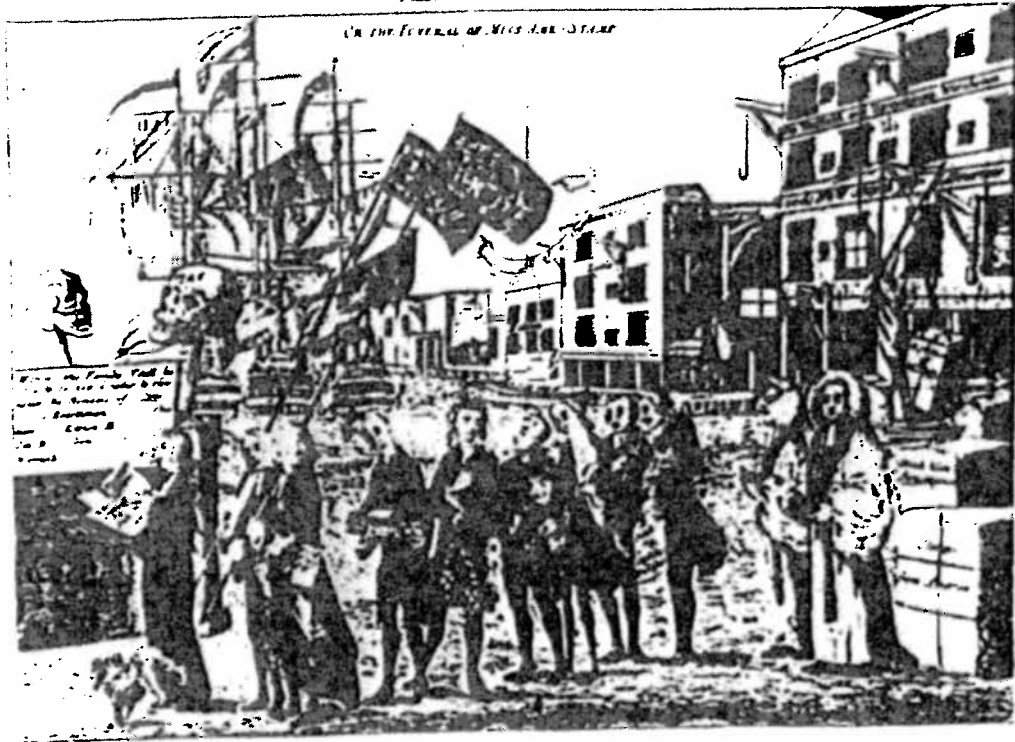
But Adams had a different and more

powerful weapon—British law itself. He wrote a long series of articles for a local newspaper to show that the Stamp Act was illegal. In those and other articles over a period of years, he set out legal arguments that led to a logical conclusion—independence.

Adams' belief that the law was a protection for all people was tested in an unusual way in 1770 when British soldiers fired on a mob throwing rocks and shouting insults at them. Even

THE REPEAL

ON THE REPEAL OF THE STAMP ACT



Colonial outrage forced Britain to repeal the Stamp Act—the subject of this contemporary woodcut. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

though only five people were killed, this action became known as the Boston Massacre.

The British commander, Captain Thomas Preston, could not find a lawyer to defend him against a charge of murder. One of his supporters came to Adams and pleaded for help. Adams did not hesitate. "If Captain Preston thinks he cannot have a fair trial without help, he shall have it," he said.

Adams pleaded self-defense for Preston and won his acquittal. He was surprised to find that the people of Boston, who were so angry with the British, did not hold that victory against him. They admired his courage in fighting for the rights of an enemy and elected Adams to the colonial assembly.

As the conflict between the British and the colonies grew, Adams was also elected to the first Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia. "You will ruin your career," one of his friends warned.

Adams replied, "Sink or swim, survive or perish, I am with my country from this day forward." In later years, many people called him Old Sink or Swim because of that statement.

At the Continental Congress in 1774 and 1775, Adams was one of the strongest supporters of independence. He nominated George Washington to command a new American army. This was

to show that the thirteen colonies could act as one and that Massachusetts would fight under a leader from Virginia.

During the early days of the Revolutionary War, Adams served on so many committees of Congress that he was, in effect, the Secretary of War. Then Congress decided that he could be more valuable abroad, seeking friends, arms, and money from foreign countries.

At first, in 1778, he was minister to France. Then he served in Holland, raising a large loan of money from that country. Later he went back to France and, together with Benjamin Franklin and John Jay, negotiated the treaty of peace with England in 1783 that ended the Revolutionary War.

Through those lonely years, John Adams had kept in touch with his wife and children by letter. But now he wrote to his wife, "I cannot be happy or tolerable without you." She joined him in London when he became the first United States minister there.

While the Adamses were in London, one of their closest friends, Thomas Jefferson, was minister to France. Adams and Jefferson wrote to each other and helped each other in many ways. Mrs. Adams ordered shirts in London for Jefferson, whose wife had died many years earlier. He bought shoes for her in Paris. She asked Jefferson to buy figurines for her London dining room. He

asked her to send tablecloths for his home in Paris.

The Adamses returned to Boston in 1788. In the new government that was formed the following year, Washington became the nation's first President as had been expected. Because Adams had received the next highest total of electoral votes, he became the first Vice-President. He took the oath of office in New York on April 21, 1789.

Being Vice-President was a disappointment to the outspoken, ambitious Adams. He wrote to his wife that the vice-presidency was "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived."

In office, Adams was not easy to get along with. He was now in his fifties, medium-sized, slightly plump, and pompous in speech. Behind his back, some of the Senators made fun of him, calling him *His Rotundity*, a reference to his stoutness and his habit of lecturing them.

When Washington was reelected in 1792, so was Adams. His chance to become President came in 1796, the year of the first partisan election for the nation's highest office. In this contest, two old friends who disagreed politically ran against each other.

As Washington's heir, Adams was the nominee of the Federalist party. His

opponent was Jefferson, the candidate of the Democratic-Republican party. Adams won a close election, with seventy-one electoral votes to Jefferson's sixty-eight.

Adams was sworn into office as the second President on March 4, 1797, in Philadelphia. Most of the crowd's cheers were for the departing Washington, however. Adams wrote to his wife, "Me thought I heard him say, 'Ay, I am fairly out and you fairly in! See which one of us will be the happier!'"

From the beginning, Adams' term of office was marked by trouble. The most serious threat came from abroad, when a war with France seemed to be at hand. Adams asked Washington to return to duty to command a new army, if needed. A Department of the Navy was organized and new warships were built.

In fact, American and French ships did fight at sea. Some historians have called that period "the quasi war," because battles were fought even though war was not declared. Many of Adams' own party, led by Alexander Hamilton, wanted a full-scale war, but the Jeffersonians opposed it.

The divisions at home were made worse by two new laws, the Alien and Sedition Acts. Under the Alien Act, the President could expel any foreigner he considered dangerous. The Sedition

Act provided fines or jail sentences for any false or critical writing about the President or Congress. The Jeffersonians were furious at what they saw as unconstitutional laws aimed at them.

Despite those strong measures, Adams was determined to make peace with France. Over the objections of Hamilton and his own party, he sent a series of ambassadors to France to work out an agreement. They finally brought back a treaty of friendship in 1800. Adams considered that keeping the peace was his greatest achievement in office, even though his support of the controversial treaty cost him reelection to the presidency.

In that same year of 1800, the national capital moved to the new city of Washington. Adams became the first President to occupy the executive mansion later known as the White House, moving in on November 1, 1800. In a letter to his wife, he wrote, "I pray heaven

to bestow the best blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof."

Adams was defeated for reelection later that year, losing to Jefferson. Bitter at his defeat, he left Washington without attending the inauguration of his former friend. He returned to his farm in Quincy, Massachusetts.

After Jefferson's retirement from the presidency, the two men resumed their old friendship, writing each other letters. Jefferson was sympathetic when Abigail Adams died in 1818, and he shared in Adams' pride when his son, John Quincy Adams, became President in 1825.

Adams died at the age of ninety-one in Quincy on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. By an amazing coincidence, Jefferson, his associate in adopting the Declaration, died on the same day.

Name _____ Period _____

John Adams: 1735-1826 Second President of the United States

Directions: Read the article "John Adams: 1735-1826 Second President of the United States" and answer the questions below.

1. What inspired John Adams to become a lawyer?

2. In what way was becoming a lawyer different during John Adams's time than it is now?

3. Besides marrying someone who would eventually become president and having a son who would eventually become president, how did Abigail Adams contribute to American history?

4. What powerful weapon does the article say John Adams use to argue against the Stamp Act?

5. Even though the people of Boston were angry at the British, why were they not mad at John Adams for being the lawyer for Captain Thomas Preston, the British commander at the Boston Massacre?

6. What did John Adams say that gave him the nickname "Old Sink of Swim"?

7. Why do you think the article said being Vice-President was a disappointment to Adams?

8. What were the Alien Act and Sedition Act?

9. What did Adams consider his greatest achievement in office? What did this achievement cost him and why?

10. After reading this article about Adams's life, what do YOU consider to be Adams's greatest achievement and why?

